

Executive Summary

2001-2002 Minority Student Achievement Preliminary Research Project

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The Minority Student Achievement Research Project is a joint effort of seven public school districts in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the Kentucky Department of Education, and AEL's Higher Education Co-Venture. The AEL-Higher Education Co-Venture consists of AEL and 15 research institutions in AEL's region – Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Collectively, they investigated the effects of districts' and/or schools' efforts to reduce the achievement gap between White and African American students in their schools. Representatives from the three Co-Venture institutions in Kentucky – University of Kentucky, University of Louisville, and Western Kentucky University – provided the seven participating districts assistance in conducting the research on an as requested basis.

The Kentucky Department of Education and the Co-Venture researchers initially decided that each school and district should address 12 questions relative to the particular strategies implemented to reduce the achievement gap in their school or district. The questions (attached as Appendix A) address how decisions were made relative to the identification and implementation of gap reduction goals and strategies, the types of data collected and analyzed, and the outcomes realized as the result of gap reduction efforts.

Each district report addressing the 12 questions was examined. While generalized statements regarding outcomes are worthwhile and informative, they may or may not apply to particular schools and/or districts. In addition, the effects on achievement gap reduction of the differences between the various strategies and implementation procedures are not known. Reducing the achievement gap takes focus, time, and effort to accomplish and demonstrate. Given that fact, what we think we know based on the data that have been collected and analyzed to this point follows.

1. What process was used to obtain each school's participation in the first year of the pilot project? Who was involved in the process? What was the decision-making time span?

The initial requests for participation in the pilot program were extended at the district level. It appears that the central administration and/or leadership group of each of the seven participating districts played significant roles in selecting the schools that were to participate and in identifying the particular strategies to be implemented or both. An example of a district decision would be Hardin County Public Schools where the district identified literacy as a key feature in the education of students in the entire district students. The district has initiated a three-year district-wide process to implement Literacy First K-2 aimed at assuring all children in the district achieve high levels of literacy. An example of a single school decision would be the Owensboro 5-6 Center which was chosen as the single site to begin the district's achievement gap initiative. In all cases, it appears that a broadly representative group of district officials, school professionals, and, in many cases, parents and community members participated in the school identification decision making process. Whether one particular process or another

is better in the overall scheme of things in reducing the achievement gap is not known at this time.

2. *What process was used to determine each school's needs? Were the data from the KCCT used in the needs analysis? What other data were used?*

In general, school and district personnel engaged in extensive analyses of student performance data to determine the nature and extent of the achievement gap with which they had to contend. It appears that these data analysis efforts were generally conducted in association with the Comprehensive Improvement Planning Process and included KCCT as well as CBTS data and other data principals, teachers, SBDM councils, and/or comprehensive planning committees collected and used at the local level. For example, to determine their needs and goals, Christian County gathered and analyzed school-wide scholastic audit and review data, school self-study information using the Standards and Indicators for School improvement, and/or student achievement performance data garnered from the KCCT and CTBS. In Jefferson County, the district's research staff has conducted extensive analyses of a variety of data to better understand the nature of the achievement gap facing the schools and the factors that influence. For instance, they examined demographic variables that are associated with school achievement problems and which may exacerbate the gap or contribute to it. They have identified one variable of interest as being family structure. Many students come from families that do not have both of the child's parents in the home as primary caregivers. These non-two parent family configurations put children at risk. It is recognized that schools cannot transform one-parent families into two parent families, but they can develop ways of making teachers and counselors sensitive to this issue and find ways to improve effectiveness of instruction for children from all types of family configurations. For most of the schools and districts however, the processes by which the analysis and understanding of school and/or district data were accomplished generally were not specified. This may indicate that schools and districts need assistance from KDE disaggregating data and/or assembling data to address special needs.

3. *Who was involved in conducting the needs assessment for each school/district? What time span was covered?*

The particular stakeholder representatives involved varied by district. In general, a broad spectrum of individuals representing different groups (e.g., principals, teachers, parents, community members, SBDM councils) was included in the needs assessment and decision making processes. Inclusion seemed to be a key feature in almost all situations. For instance, Paducah involved a large number of district staff including the superintendent and various directors, principals, and coordinators. In Jefferson County, many efforts to deal with the achievement gap are grass roots efforts involving single schools such as the faculty professional development activities at Waggener High School who worked with a faculty member from the University of Louisville during the 2001-2002 school year. There, faculty addressed the achievement gap issue by: (a) examining KCCT test score data and discussing ways of reducing the achievement gap, (b) receiving workshop training from a University of Louisville professor of Pan-African studies, (c)

visiting Bowling Green High School to study what successes that school has had with reducing the achievement gap, and (d) using the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) equity website. Another Jefferson County example of inclusion of different groups in addressing the achievement gap was a set of focus groups involving representative groups of African American middle school and high school students. The purpose was to learn from students themselves what they thought accounted for the gap. Students used their own words, gave frank opinions, and aired problems in teacher/student relations that can provide the basis for action. Data from these student focus groups have been used for planning and to inform teacher professional development.

In sum, it seems, based on the available data, that needs assessment and inclusive decision making processes are part of the ongoing comprehensive planning and development already set in motion by districts/schools and these process are generally working. The particular time span associated with the process was not always discernable. In addition, the effects of different patterns of inclusion on the ultimate reduction of the achievement gap are not known at this time.

4. *Who analyzed the needs assessment data for each school? What analysis processes were used? What were the results of the needs analysis for each school?*

The person or persons responsible for conducting the data analyses completed is not always clear. In some instances, central office personnel or research and evaluation professionals within the district conducted analyses of various types of data that were then shared with stakeholders (e.g., the superintendent, school board members, teachers, etc.) who were then asked to review those analyses and to engage in strategic planning based on their interpretations of the data analyses. In Bardstown, for instance, the initial needs assessment and feedback for the participating schools was provided by the Kentucky Department of Education Scholastic Audit process. Additional identification of needs from analyses of CATS, KCCT, and CTBS tests was provided to the schools by the district. In Jefferson County, the district's research staff at conducted a school-by-school analysis of achievement gap data where they identified schools with the highest priorities for intervention to be low achieving schools regardless of the size of the achievement gap between Whites and African-Americans. It was concluded that it was imperative to move both groups forward and to move them forward equally.

5. *Who was responsible for sharing the results of the needs assessment for each school? How were the results of the needs analysis for shared?*

The results of the needs assessments were shared in various ways. District level analyses were made available to schools (e.g., principals, teachers, SBDM councils, community members) using information dissemination systems already in place within the districts. The particular means of communication depended on the nature of the data analyses, focus of the pilot, size of the district, etc. At Cassidy Elementary School in the

Fayette County Public Schools, the principal was responsible for sharing findings with the SBDM council and teachers at regularly scheduled meetings. In the Christian County Public Schools, members of the District Steering Committee and the Comprehensive Improvement Planning Committee were responsible for discussing the results of the needs assessment and information was shared with teachers and staff through regularly scheduled committee and staff meetings. The effects on the reduction of the achievement gap of the different methods used to share the results of the needs assessment are not known.

6. *What goals and strategies were chosen by each school for implementation? Who was involved in the selection of those goals? How were the goals and strategies selected?*

The school/district reports clearly reflect that the different schools and districts chose to implement different strategies to reduce the achievement gap. While the individual reports detail the particular strategies selected for implementation, the rationale for the particular choices made was not always evident. The reports also clearly demonstrate that achievement gap reduction processes and procedures must be adapted to the local school setting, student needs, teacher skills and experiences. For example, the faculty and staff at Cassidy Elementary School in Fayette County examined the research literature relative to effective gap reduction practices that served to frame their intervention strategies that involved the organization of the school (i.e., class size), that involved the community (i.e., a community based language development program for kindergarten and first grade children was implemented), and that involved professional development for the faculty about culturally responsive teaching. Another elementary school in the pilot executed a somewhat different plan. Based on analyses of their own school level data, the Owensboro 5-6 Center focused on decreasing the number of minority student office discipline referrals, increasing the number of minority students participating in advanced placement classes, and increasing the cultural awareness of the faculty.

7. *How did each of the selected goals and strategies relate to each school's identified need(s)?*

While it appears that district wide goals and strategies probably played a role in the selection of goal reduction strategies, there were also instances where they were individualized at the school level by principals, teachers, SBDM councils, and/or representative committees. For instance, in Hardin County the goals and strategies were established at the district level whereas in Bardstown SBDM Councils for the participating schools reviewed goals and strategies to adapt them to the empirical evidence derived from assessment, student performance on standardized tests, the Scholastic Audit, and community input.

8. *How are the selected strategies intended to address each school's needs? How are the selected strategies intended to make a difference in student achievement?*

Given the planning processes that appear to have been involved in most instances, stakeholders of various groups provided input into what was actually attempted given the presentation of a variety of data regarding school needs. In Paducah, for instance, the strategies and activities were developed to address goals in community involvement, instructional change, and program evaluation. In each instance, the goals served to provide focus to activities to reduce the achievement gap.

9. *How well were each school's selected strategies implemented relative to proposed time lines and intended activities?*

Each school's or district's implementation pattern and success is unique to the complexity and specificity of the particular plans developed by each school and/or district. At Morton Middle School in the Fayette County Public Schools some of the intervention programs directed towards addressing the achievement gap were developed, implemented, and institutionalized prior to participation in the pilot program. Other strategies implemented at Morton Middle Schools were developed in response to the pilot initiative and implemented during the 18 month project period. At Henry Clay High School in Fayette County an equity audit revealed that several content areas including the language arts program were not aligned with the core content. In response to the equity audit, the faculty and administration developed a set of strategies to enhance their language arts program. One of those strategies was to initiate a 2002 summer school program supported through the ESS program. The initial results indicate that the 40 students who participated in the summer school program demonstrated significant reading gains. In Jefferson County, where the focus was on the need for better information to guide that work effectively and efficiently, a research study was designed and implemented. There they used in-depth interviews with school personnel as part of the district's regular process of "school dialogues" to investigate the instructional practices of schools in the district that were high performing and had either relatively high or low achievement gaps between African American and White students. Although no differences in instructional practices between low-gap and high gap schools were found, the research process had the benefit of sensitizing all school personnel in the dialog schools (i.e., in both low gap and high gap schools) to the issues surrounding equity and the overall goal of having all students reach proficiency on KCCT assessments.

10. *Did each school establish an outcome measure for each strategy to be implemented? What was the measure? What were the results of the implementation as indicated by outcome measures?*

It appears that each school and/or district established outcome measures to be used to assess the effects of the various strategies and programs developed and implemented to reduce the Achievement Gap. The particular measures varied from school to school and district to district. In general, student achievement measures (e.g., KCCT) were used in conjunction with data collection procedures tailored to particular outcomes. For instance, in the Owensboro 5-6 Center, discipline referrals and

placements in advanced classes have been monitored and counted. Since reading was a district initiative in Hardin County, more involved and complex diagnostic assessments in Phonological Awareness and phonics were employed to judge the success of the reading program. The Literacy First initiative produces reports that give outcomes for every possible subgroup—by school, ethnicity, gender, and grade. Statistical analysis performed for the gap project showed no difference on outcomes between African American and White students on six different comparisons. However, as grade level increased from Kindergarten to grade 1 to grade 2 differences between African American and White students tended to increase.

11. *What changes occurred in each school that can be attributed to the pilot project?*

We are at the preliminary stages of being able to talk about outcomes. In some instances, quantitative student achievement data are available and initial results are promising. For example, Cassidy Elementary School in the Fayette County Public Schools has data from the Scholastic Reading Inventory that the reading achievement gap between African American students and white students has lessen. In other instances, the data are less solid and may or may not indicate progress. For instance, schools report increased cultural awareness of staff or increased placement of African American students in advanced classes. Whether these outcomes will translate to a reduction of the achievement gap has yet to be demonstrated. More time must pass to allow opportunity for such strategies to produce their desired effects. In addition, more powerful evaluation designs must be put into place at the school level to be able to state with certainty the causal effects of implemented strategies on student achievement and reduction in the gap.

12. *What changes unrelated to the pilot project occurred in each school during the pilot project that might have had either a positive or negative impact on the project?*

Schools are influenced by many different factors each year; what factors come into play vary from year to year and from school to school. For example, some of the districts/schools are experiencing staff turnover in key position through retirement. Other schools are experiencing changing populations of students served, increased transience of students, and so on. The impact of these changes has yet to be fully assessed. Perhaps the biggest challenge administrators and teachers are facing is making admittedly difficult decisions as to how to use limited resources to target those students with the greatest needs and to implement strategies to reduce the gap. Just throwing dollars at the problem will most likely not produce a reduction in the achievement gap however. Rather, the strategies systematically developed and implemented to reduce the gap will have to be targeted, modified based on analyses of student performance data, and relentless in the pursuit of reducing the gap. That schools recognize this is probably best exemplified in the Bardstown Independent School District report which states that it is unfortunate that the initiative to attack the achievement gap and to reduce and eliminate it comes at a time when there is an economic downturn and legislative budget gridlock. These factors make it unlikely that additional funding will be made available to schools

and districts to support their achievement gap reduction efforts. Further, the district report states that the district recognizes that it must make tough internal human and fiscal resource decisions to address the problem and that doing nothing is not an option.

The conclusions that may be drawn at this point include:

- **All participating school and district reports clearly indicate that schools and districts are using data to drive their decision making**
- **Student performance data are being used to identify needs and pinpoint solutions**
- **Much of the work is being done in collaboration with key stakeholders in the community**
- **The use of data as the basis of decision making has also served to focus attention of teachers and school administrators on the achievement gap in their schools**
- **Reducing the gap is an ongoing process that takes TIME to accomplish and to measure and evaluate**
- **The school and district reports also indicate that amassing and arraying the appropriate fiscal and human resources to implement strategies is going to be challenging to say the least**

Appendix A

Minority Student Achievement Gap 12 Questions

1. What process was used to obtain each school's participation in the first year of the pilot project? Who was involved in the process? What was the decision making time span?
2. What process was used to determine each school's needs? Were the data from the KCCT used in the needs analysis? What other data were used?
3. Who was involved in conducting the needs assessment for each school/district? What time span was covered?
4. Who analyzed the needs assessment data for each school? What analysis processes were used? What were the results of the needs analysis for each school?
5. Who was responsible for sharing the results of the needs assessment for each school? How were the results of the needs analysis for shared?
6. What goals and strategies were chosen by each school for implementation? Who was involved in the selection of those goals? How were the goals and strategies selected?
7. How did each of the selected goals and strategies relate to each school's identified need(s)?
8. How are the selected strategies intended to address each school's needs? How are the selected strategies intended to make a difference in student achievement?
9. How well were each school's selected strategies implemented relative to proposed time lines and intended activities?
10. Did each school establish an outcome measure for each strategy to be implemented? What was the measure? What were the results of the implementation as indicated by outcome measures?
11. What changes occurred in each school that can be attributed to the pilot project?
12. What changes unrelated to the pilot project occurred in each school during the pilot project that might have had either a positive or negative impact on the project?